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ABSTRACT

This digest defines the concept of teacher leadership and examines the impact of teacher leadership on student achievement and equity within the schools. Most researchers agree that teacher leaders demonstrate expertise in their instruction and share that knowledge with colleagues; are consistently on a professional learning curve; practice reflection; engage in continuous action research; collaborate with peers, parents, and communities; become socially aware and politically involved; mentor new teachers; become more involved in preparing pre-service teachers; and are risk-takers who participate in school decisions. The ultimate measure of teacher leaders' contributions is the impact on student academic achievement. While some studies demonstrate no evidence supporting a relationship between teacher leadership and student achievement, others suggest that the bureaucracy of schools and systems, as well as the attitudes of educational policymakers, stifles the possibilities for teacher leaders to be effective as change agents. Some research suggests that unless issues of power, race, and class are addressed in school communities, the achievement levels of minority students will not be affected by teacher empowerment, noting that teacher leaders must learn to challenge the intellectual structures, definitions, and assumptions about people of color in Eurocentric institutions. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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By

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Teachers As Leaders In Education Reform

Joan Wynne

Over the last two decades, much has been written about the need to develop teacher leaders (TL) in schools. In 1986, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy reported that unless teachers are empowered and supported as professionals, schools will not be able to sustain significant change through school reform efforts. Subsequently, several studies were released that concluded that teachers need to fully participate as leaders in the process of whole-school change if reform is to be successful (Conley and Muncey, 1999; Lieberman, 1988; Urbanski and Nickolaou, 1997). Current research suggests, however, that although teacher leaders make significant contributions to schools, other factors are necessary to bring about some reform goals. This digest defines the concept of teacher leadership and looks at the impact of teacher leadership on student achievement and equity within the schools.

Defining Teacher Leadership

Most of the researchers involved in exploring the concept of teachers as leaders agree that it is distinctly different from administrative or managerial concepts of leadership. Various studies indicate that effective teacher leadership involves a move away from top-down, hierarchical modes of functioning and a move toward shared decision-making, teamwork, and community building (Alvaredo, 1997; Coyle, 1997).

Several models have emerged for developing teacher leaders. For example, the National Writing Project (NWP) promotes a leadership model of teachers growing professionally by sharing their best practices with peers and with diverse audiences at professional conferences, through journal publications, and through the design of teacher workshops and institutes. A similar program, IMPACT II, funded by the MetLife Foundation, awards grants for exemplary teacher projects and creates networking opportunities.

In addition to projects like these, a few degreed teacher leadership programs have sprung up around the country: Jacqueline B. Vaughn Graduate School for Teachers, Chicago, IL; Center for Educational Leadership, California State University, Hayward, CA; Teacher Leadership, Wheelock College, Boston; Teacher as Leader, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Teacher Leader Program, Wright State University; and the Urban Teacher Leadership MS at Georgia State University. These programs and other studies continue to examine the qualities and/or behaviors that distinguish teachers as leaders (Alverado, 1997; Crowther, 1997; O'Hair and Reitzug, 1997; Paulu and Winters, 1998; Wynne, 2001). The majority seem to agree that teacher leaders:

- Demonstrate expertise in their instruction and share that knowledge with other professionals,
- Are consistently on a professional learning curve,
- Frequently reflect on their work to stay on the cutting edge of what's best for children,
- Engage in continuous action research projects that examine their effectiveness,
- Collaborate with their peers, parents, and communities, engaging them in dialogues of open inquiry/action/assessment models of change,
- Become socially conscious and politically involved,
- Mentor new teachers,
- Become more involved at universities in the preparation of pre-service teachers, and
- Are risk-takers who participate in school decisions.

In addition, several studies indicate that one of the most significant developmental skills is for teachers to become active researchers in their classrooms and schools. For all of these qualities to be sustained, however, many argue that a shift in governance needs to take hold, embracing the idea of teachers as equal partners in leadership. Researchers insist that teachers are too often left out of the loop of leadership in their schools; and, all too often, if given leadership roles, lack the skills that will make them successful as leaders (Sherrill, 1999; Zimpher and Howey, 1992). Many teachers need encouragement from administrators and colleagues to shift from their perception of isolation into recognition of themselves as active contributors in a larger context, outside classroom walls.

Teacher Leaders and Student Academic Performance

The ultimate measure of the contributions of teacher leaders, proponents suggest, is the impact of teacher leaders on student academic performance. Many scholars assume that the one causes the other (Lieberman, 1992). Nevertheless, a study by Leithwood and Jantzi in 1999 indicates that while a multitude of qualitative studies suggest the efficacy of teachers as leaders, few quantitative studies have tested this notion. The studies that have tested it found no conclusive evidence to support any positive correlation between student achievement and teacher leadership. Leithwood's study, involving a sample of 1,762 teachers and 9,941 students in a large Canadian School district, not only found no impact of teacher leadership on raising student achievement, but also hypothesized that by trying to combine leadership with teaching, teaching is devalued.

Other research suggests that the bureaucracy of schools and systems, as well as the attitudes of educational policy makers, stifle the possibilities for teacher leaders to be effective as change agents. Barriers such as too little time during the work day for reflection, rigid school schedules, unrelated instructional tasks, jealousies and/or lack of support from peer teachers and administrators, and overemphasis on state mandated high-stakes testing hamper the effectiveness of many teachers who, while teaching, step beyond their classrooms to lead (Paulu and Winters,1998). All of these barriers leave too many teachers feeling powerless. However, despite these impediments, most school reform studies continue to advocate for teacher empowerment, shared governance, collegial collaboration, professional development, and more time for reflection. They see TL qualities as necessary elements for redesigning schools for success.

Teacher Leaders and Equity Issues

In 1999, Pauline Lipman evaluated two southern schools where TL reform components existed. She discovered that African American students in these schools experienced no gain in academic achievement. Her study indicated that

unless issues of power, race, and class are addressed in school communities, the achievement level of African American students will not be affected by the empowerment of their teachers. Similar results were discovered in another study in the south that involved three metropolitan school districts (Wynne, 2000). By failing to confront issues of inequity, some schools inadvertently reproduce African American student failure and disempowerment through educational reform (Lipman, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Wynne, 2000).

Scholars suggest that one of the largest failures in the quest to raise the academic achievement of children of color in urban and rural schools seems to be the schools' inability to respect and listen to the voices of parents and students in these communities. In fact, many scholars and practitioners seem to believe that any positive effects of teacher leadership and school reform for those communities are doomed without attending to the imperative of giving voice to the silenced (Delpit, 1997; Hilliard, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Moses, 2001). O'Hair & Reitzug report that in most mainstream discussions concerning teacher leadership, issues of student and community equity and input too often are not addressed.

To confront those issues, Hilliard suggests, teacher leaders must learn to challenge the "intellectual structures, definitions, and assumptions" about people of color in Euro-centric institutions (1997). His research indicates that in schools where those theories are challenged, students excel (1991).

A movement is growing among diverse educational stakeholders to seek, as Bob Moses (2001) suggests, "the solutions for educational problems from within schools and communities themselves," not outside among traditional cadres of experts. In the educational history of African Americans, a strong strand of support exists for organizing from the bottom up. In African American Freedom Schools, the message was that the power for change must come from "the root. . . the people who are at the bottom" (Grant, 1998; Harding, 1990; Horton, 1998; Moses, 2001).

A compelling example of teacher leadership, which seems also to summarize the most evolved concept in the TL research literature, is the work of Ella Baker who believed that "What is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others." This is a model grounded in Baker's theory that "We are the people we have been waiting for" (Reagon, 2001).

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